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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DUBAI 000730

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TAGS: [IR](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SCUL](#) [SOVI](#)
SUBJECT: IN IRAN, CARTOON CONTROVERSY SIMMERS BUT DOESN'T BOIL OVER

REF: KUALA LUMPUR 0242

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jason L. Davis, Consul General, Dubai, UAE.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (U) Summary: In response to the publishing of "blasphemous" cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in a number of European newspapers, Tehran has recalled its ambassador to Denmark and announced a cut in all trade ties with the country. Denmark pulled its diplomats out of Iran due to unspecified threats. Since February 6, Iranians have marched on several European embassies. For the most part, Iranian police have held back demonstrators and prevented them from doing significant damage to any of the embassies. Religious and government officials called upon Iranians to not attack embassies, and urged diplomatic solutions to the situation, as well as apologies from governments of countries where the cartoons appeared. Iran appears to be using the controversy to further its own interests. End Summary.

Official Repercussions

¶2. (U) According to Western press reports, Tehran reacted to the cartoon controversy last week by summoning the ambassadors of Denmark, Norway and Austria to express its anger, recalling its ambassador to Denmark, and cutting all trade ties with the country. Iran's Commerce Minister stated that this ban covered all Danish imports as well as all other business dealings. Iran currently imports 290 million USD worth of goods annually from Denmark. According to Norwegian press, Iran's embassy in Oslo commented that as a result of Norway's "suitable behavior" - read apology - over the cartoons, Tehran planned no boycott against it. Due to subsequent publication of the cartoons in newspapers in Poland and the Czech Republic, the ambassadors of these two countries were summoned to Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 12 February.

¶3. (SBU) According to reports in the Iranian press, Denmark has "temporarily" withdrawn its diplomats from Iran. A statement by the Danish Foreign Ministry stated that the ambassador and staff had left Iran due to "information about serious, concrete threats against the ambassador." Post tried unsuccessfully to corroborate this information with the Danish consulate in Dubai.

Popular Reaction

¶4. (U) Since Monday, February 6, large groups of Iranians have marched on European embassies to protest the publishing of

"blasphemous" cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. Protests in Iran broke out two days after the violent protests in Damascus that resulted in the burning of the Norwegian and Danish embassies. Although these protests have been angry, police have for the most part been successful in holding the protestors back and preventing the torching of embassies as occurred in both Beirut and Damascus:

-- February 6, a group of 400 demonstrators surrounded the Danish Embassy. They burned Danish flags and shouted "Death to Denmark." According to the BBC, the Embassy gate and two trees caught fire before police forced protestors back with tear gas and made some arrests.

--The same day, protestors marched on the Austrian Embassy, apparently breaking windows and starting small fires.

-- February 7, 100 protestors converged on the Norwegian Embassy. According to Norwegian press, they threw stones and "fire bombs", but were quickly driven back by Iranian police who surrounded the building and prevented them from gaining access to the building.

-- February 8, 200 demonstrators marched on the British Embassy, but police barred them from entering the building, according to the BBC.

-- February 10, protestors gathered outside the French Embassy and shouted slogans against the U.S., France, Britain, and Denmark, according to Iranian press.

-- February 11, an unspecified number of Iranians gathered in front of the British Embassy in the afternoon and shouted slogans against the cartoons. A special police unit had been stationed around the Embassy for several hours and prevented the crowd from getting close to the embassy building, according to Iran's state news agency.

-- February 11, participants in rallies to celebrate the

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anniversary of the Islamic revolution condemned the cartoons, chanted anti-U.S., Danish, British, and Israeli slogans, and called for a boycott of Western products, especially those of the U.S. and Denmark.

-- February 12, Iranians once again protested outside the French Embassy and termed the publication of the cartoons a "sacrilegious gesture" designed by Zionists.

Iranian Officials Send Mixed Messages

15. (U) According to the Iranian press, the substitute Friday prayer leader for Tehran told Iranians on February 10 to continue to show their anger over the cartoons. He advised protestors, however, to refrain from attacking embassies, as this would only give Western powers a "pretext" to proclaim "their innocence worldwide." He stated, "They should be deprived of this pretext, but undoubtedly, your anger and resentment should continue until their complete repentance." An unidentified cleric who participated in the protest at the French Embassy on February 10 was quoted in the Iranian press saying that the current crisis would not die down until the relevant governments apologized.

16. (U) According to other Iranian reports, Iran's Foreign Minister Mottaki has discussed the cartoon controversy with the Foreign Ministers of several countries, including Norway, Spain, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Syria, Malaysia, and Yemen, and urged his European counterparts to do their utmost to defuse the situation. Tehran also requested that Malaysia, as head of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), call an emergency session of the body to discuss the global protests in response to the cartoons and the impact of the situation on Islamic countries (reftel). Mottaki stated that legal prosecution and an

apology from the Danish government will help restore calm.

¶17. (U) While attending a conference in Malaysia (reftel), Iran's former President Khatami echoed Mottaki's statements, stating that "those who have insulted (the) Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) must apologize for their shameful act." (Note: Khatami gave the keynote speech at the conference, which was aptly titled "Who Speaks for Islam? Who Speaks for the West?" End Note.)

Key Leaders Link Cartoon Controversy to the Holocaust

¶18. (U) Both Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad have repeatedly complained about a Western "double-standard" in regards to free speech. During a speech to a gathering of air force commanders and personnel, Khamenei stated, "In accordance with this freedom of speech, denial of the holocaust has been banned, but sacrilege against the sanctities of 1.5 billion Muslims has been allowed." He termed the cartoon controversy a "Zionist plot meant to pit Muslims and Christians against each other," but noted that the "sacred fury" of Muslims was not directed at Christians, but at the "vicious plotters of the conspiracy."

¶19. (U) During speeches to commemorate the 27th anniversary of the Islamic revolution February 11, Ahmadinejad accused European countries of being puppets of the Israelis for publishing the cartoons. He stated, "They say that their countries are free, but they are lying. They are held hostage by Zionists. . . How come insults are free in your country, but any research on the Holocaust is a crime?"

¶10. (U) In response to the cartoons' publication, the conservative Iranian daily Hamshahri, which is run by Tehran's city council, announced it is sponsoring a cartoon contest about the Holocaust. The paper's graphics editor stated, "The Western papers printed these sacrilegious cartoons on the pretext of freedom of expression, so let's see if they mean what they say and also print these Holocaust cartoons."

Another Cartoon Controversy

¶11. (U) In a related story, Iran demanded an apology from the German newspaper that printed a cartoon February 10, depicting the Iranian national soccer team in a World Cup stadium with bombs strapped to their jerseys, with German soldiers standing by and a caption saying, "This is why the German army has to be deployed at the World Cup stadiums." According to Iranian press, the artist expressed regret to the Iranian people and claimed he was trying to protest the absurdity of positioning soldiers at the World Cup games.

Comment

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¶12. (C) Many Western analysts see the linking of the cartoons and the Holocaust as the Iranian government's attempt to increase tension and "up the ante" in the current situation, especially in light of Ahmadinejad's anti-Israel comments in the fall. Thus far, Dubai's Iranian visa applicants have been quiet on the controversy. Iran likely sees in the controversy a chance to assert its leadership in the Muslim world, much as it did in 1989 when -- after initial reticence -- it took the hardest line of any Islamic country against British author Salman Rushdie for his book, "The Satanic Verses," issuing a fatwa that called for his murder. It is also likely trying to deflect world attention from its nuclear situation and put Europe on the defensive at a time when the U.S. is looking to Europe to continue to toughen its stand on the nuclear issue.

¶13. (C) One Iranian wealthy businessman contact argued that the cartoon controversy actually gave an advantage to the U.S. He claimed that none of the protests were directed against the U.S.

(which would appear to be overstating the situation). With Iranian-European relations at a low-point, he said, Iran would have little choice but to deal in a more direct way with the U.S. That interpretation notwithstanding, President Ahmadinejad appears to feel strengthened by the controversy. In a February 12 interview with a U.S. reporter, President Ahmadinejad criticized the U.S. for giving "support" to those who published the cartoons, and he put the onus on the USG to change its attitude toward Iran before negotiations would be possible.

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